

On Language and Ideology in Joachim Ringelnatz's Turngedichte

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Abstract

In stark contrast to Joachim Ringelnatz's (1883–1934) popularity, his works received only little scholarly attention, since the stereotypical views of Ringelnatz as an apolitical “entertainer” who does not engage in social and political discourses of his time entrenched the literary historiography. Challenging the stereotypical views, the article assembles Ringelnatz's subtle political statement on linguistic nationalism within his poetry collection Turngedichte (1920): Ringelnatz refers to the influential proponents of linguistic nationalism and analogously defamiliarizes and ridicules their nationalist rhetoric by parodic recontextualization.

Keywords: Joachim Ringelnatz, Turngedichte, linguistic nationalism, language, critique of ideology.

Introduction

Joachim Ringelnatz (Hans Böttcher, 1883–1934) is one of the most read German poets of Weimar Republic. In stark contrast to his books being easily available in commercial bookstores throughout the German speaking countries, the acknowledged classic of humorous literature remains a scholarly unexplored author. Walter Pape's monography (1974) and the two books of essays (2000) represent the only systematic explorations of his work. Frank Möbus, the editor of both publications from 2000, perceives the negligence of scholarly readers to the “serious”, socially-engaged and political side of Ringelnatz's artistic world as a primary cause of his marginalized status in literary criticism. In his study, Möbus reacts to the stereotypical conceptualizations of Ringelnatz as of an apolitical, socially disinterested “entertainer” [2000: 168] who refuses to engage with the social discourses of his time (in Kindlers neues Literaturlexikon from 1986 we read that “die Lyrik von Ringelnatz, die wenig soziales und politisches Engagement zeige, höheren Ansprüchen nicht genüge“ [qtd. in Möbus 2000: 167]). As the political dimension of Ringelnatz's famous contemporaries within the

period when the politization of literature constituted literatures' dominant characteristic is much more explicit, the social relevance of Ringelnatz's work remained unnoticed even by the subsequent commentators [168]. Even though Möbus' portrayal of Ringelnatz's grotesque humour as of a noetic-value lacking "shadow", "overshadowing" his "serious side" [167] strikes as non-dialogical, the non-comprehension of Ringelnatz within the political contexts of his period indeed contributed to the present absence of Ringelnatz-scholarship. To contribute to comprehension of Ringelnatz in political contexts, we assemble Ringelnatz's reaction to the linguistic nationalism within his Turngedichte.

Turngedichte

Paradoxically, the book which brought Ringelnatz significant fame and remains as one of his most famous works, *Turngedichte* (1920, extended version in 1923), lends itself at a first sight as a political utterance: its old-fashioned calligraphy and illustrations reminiscing the 19th century, the publisher of first-edition claims in the foreword that the poems will elevate the "German nation" "auf die herzequikende Höhe von 1813" [qtd. in Doering 2000: 101], respectively to the "height" of times when German nationalism flourished as regions of Germany mobilized in the military victory against the Napoleonic France.

Whereas the very incautious reading could possibly allow to falsely perceive the first poem, despite of the parodic nature of its' heroic exclamations and the concluding morbid pun, as a nationalist utterance, the second poem makes Ringelnatz's parodic intentions impossible to overlook: the nationalist is not encouraged to aspire to a "noble", abstract and idealistic goals, but toward the grotesque materiality: "Stelle dir vor: Dort oben winken/ Schnäpse und Schinken" (Ringelnatz 2015: 98). The central object of Ringelnatz's ridicule is the so called "Turnbewegung" (turnerism) – an ideological movement synthetizing calisthenics and physical vitality with the "forming" of a German nation and "German" identity. Using a degrading attribute "forever female", Ringelnatz refers to the movement's founder, the enthusiastic proponent of "masculinity" Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852, known as "Turnvater Jahn"), who grounded the movement with an intention to prepare and mobilize the youth for the fights against the Napoleonic France and to educate on "Germanenes" (Though his *Die Deutsche Turnkunst* appeared in 1816): "Das Unbeschreibliche zieht uns hinan,/ Der ewigweibliche Turnvater Jahn" (2015: 99); "Ich warne euch, ihr Brüder Jahns,/ Vor dem Gebrauch des Fußballwahns!" (2015: 108).

Despite its old tradition, Ringelnatz's derision of turnerism isn't a ridicule which relates to a bygone past. After the loss of the WW1, the turnerism as a mean for restoration of the damaged "national pride" experiences comeback and rise in popularity. As a movement hostile to the democratic principles of the Weimar Republic, "[n]ationale und völkische Elemente bildeten die Eckpfeiler der geistigpolitischen Ausrichtung der Arbeit und Politik der Turnerschaft" (Peiffer 2007: 94).

Notwithstanding turnerism's ideological undertones, Walter Pape postpones that Turngedichte do not represent a political satire motivated by Ringelnatz's political intentions, but that the poems are "only" a jeer made on the account of "das erneute Aufflammen der kuriosen Verquickung von Turnerei und Vaterland" and of the highly enthusiastic exercising (1974: 177). The proposition about an apolitical nature of poems is substantiated by the factuality that even though turnerism did surge in popularity in an afterwar Germany, it hasn't expanded into an epoch-symbolising, "symbolical" phenomenon, but remained only a fractional component of the miscellaneous mosaics of the epochs' "increased idealism" (176-178).

However, the political satire doesn't depend on the subversion of a socially "symbolic" phenomena to perform its function. Therefore, I incline to a more political reading of Sabine Doering, who analyses the corporeality of Turngedichte and subsequently accentuates Ringelnatz's not solely to turnerism, but to all period discourses responding, body-central anti-ideology (Doering 2000).

The ideological attachment of a subject to the "noble", individuality-transcending abstract "goal", which Ringelnatz parodies by the hyperbolic exclamation and juxtaposition with the motive of "not-thinking" ("Zu! Zu! Tu nicht überlegen./ Immer weiter, herrlichen Zielen entgegen" [Ringelnatz 2015: 99]), is a stereotypical characteristic not only of turnerism, but of the language of right-wing extremism in general (Štefančík, Hvasta 2019: 136). Pars pro toto, Ringelnatz targets turnerism as his motivic material, on which he parodically demonstrates the overall absurdity of a nationalist, highly ideologized orientation at a collective ideal. Thus, Turngedichte do not ridicule solely turnerism but comply with the Ringelnatz's overall tendency to degrade nationalism: In his unnamed poem from 1922, the lyrical I listens to patriotic songs ("patriotische Lieder") but instead of adapting their ideological content, starts urinating to their melodies (2015: 154).

While Doering demonstrates the anti-ideological nature of Turngedichte on a motivic level, in which "(a)uf die (...) verbreiteten Versuche, den Menschlichen Körper in Form, Ausdruck und Leistungsvermögen einem uberindividuellen Ideal anzupassen, antwortete Ringelnatz (...) mit freudliche Anarchie" (2000: 107), there is also another, linguistic anti-ideological

dimension to Turngedichte, present within the mimetic nature of Ringelnatz's pseudo-nationalist utterances, which does not oppose only the ideological manipulation of corporeality but also of language. Two facts suggest Ringelnatz's preoccupation with the language of ideology: He refers to two influential nationalist authors, who have conceptualized the German language as an instrument for the formation of a "German" national identity. Also, the first "programmatic" poem draws attention to the very process of constructing a self-identity and the feeling of "national belonging" through the medium of language, as Ringelnatz's nationalist ecstatically declares that "Turnersprache lasst uns reden" (Ringelnatz 2015: 98), hence acknowledges that it is a certain ideological system of language use ("Turnersprache"), to which he inclines with an intention to express (and therewith conceptualize) his identity. Just like the derided, "forever female" F. L. Jahn, the patriot here too inclines to the medium of language consciously – "devotes himself" to language in order to express his belonging to a self-transcending collective union.

The travesty of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn and Friedrich Dahn

Through the 19th century, the German language served within the nationalist discourses as a nation-mobilizing agent, allowing to distinguish between the "German" "self" and "otherness" (Cingerová, Dulebová 2019: 10). Consequently, after the unification of Germany in 1871, "the nation is configured as a speech community of ethnic Germans" (Linke 2003: 157). Within the historical context of the Napoleonic occupation of German territories, F. L. Jahn provides an exemplary demonstration of the linguistic nationalism by creating his "Turnersprache", an artificial language intended to "purify" the German language from the "non-German" influences and to serve as a language which would "befit" the "Germanenes" (1816: 19-42). Aspiring to educate his readers on a "link" between the "nation, germanenes and homeland", the "Turnersprache" has to be in accordance with the "Germanenes" "ernst, gesetzt, männlich und edel (...) einfach, klar, bündig, herzlich, Deutsch heraus, nicht hinter dem Berg haltend, wahrheitsvoll, volkfaßlich, gleich fern von Schmutz und Putz" (1816: 38-39). In the spirit of romanticism, Jahn envisions German language as a "proto-language" ("Ursprache", 1816: 23) and the syllable "Turn" as a "German protosyllable" ("Deutscher Urlaut", 1816: 27). To prove his point, Jahn creates sixty lexical pairs for the word "turnen" (1816: 26-27). Ringelnatz ridicules Jahn's linguistic endeavours by rhyming the word "turne" with the non-optimistic "Urne" ("coffin"). This allusive parodic juxtaposition is accom-

panied with a Jahn's nationalist rhetoric alluding ironic appellation on the reader to feel his belonging to a regionality-transcending "Germanenes": "Heil! Umschlingt euch mit Herz und Hand,/ Ihr Brüder aus Nord-, Süd- und Mitteldeutschland!/ Daß einst um eure Urne/ Eine gleiche Generation turne" (2015: 98). Parallely, Ringelnatz's incorporation of the non-optimistic „coffin“ into the "call" to "build" the "nationalist future" represents a subversion of the stereotypical, at the national future oriented nationalist pathos; a subversion of the nationalist utterances typical for the second influential author referred to in *Turngedichte* ("Vivat Vater Felix Dahn!" [2015: 98]), who in his *An die Deutschen* appaels on the "young generation" to „save“ the „german“ future: "Aber gedenkt, daß der Jugend Recht,/ Daß es die Zukunft zu retten gilt!/ Hoch erhebet des Rechtes Schild" (2016: 62). Ringelnatz's appeal to "clasp" the "heart" and "hand" is a parodic allusion to Dahn' tendency to express the feeling of a "national belonging" through physical gestures (for ex. to "heave up" the "right shield" "highly").

Felix Dahn (1834 – 1912), a popular nationalist writer, poet, historian and law-professor, whose famous historical novels combined Darwinist and nationalist elements and contributed to the preparation of an "intellectual soil" for Hitler's "national socialism" (Housden 1997: 3), was significantly praised by the nationalists within the Weimar period. Although Dahn illustrates turnerism as a positive expression of German identity ("Ihr Name wird mit Ruhm genannt,/ Weithin durch alles deutsche Land:/ Am Hof, im Feld und im Turnei, –/ Graf Hartungs Söhne sind dabei" [2016: 18]), it hasn't been a thematic focus of his work. Thus, Ringelnatz's referring to Dahn as to a nationalist poet is an another hint that not the turnerism solely, but also the nationalist manipulation of language represents his thematic concern.

As a nationalist ("völkisch") poet typicam exemplum, Dahn follows the anti-Napoleonic legacy of a "fabricated linguistic nationalism" (Linke 2003: 157) and conceptualizes the "German identity" through German language. *Die Deutschen im Auslande* is a suggestive appeal to praise the "German language" as ones most valuable "treasure", while *Lied der Deutschen jenseit der Meere* also exemplifies "language" as a symbol of "national belonging" (to be "German" is to "speak German"): "Wohin wir wandern tragen wir/ Mit uns die deutsche Sprache" (2016: 67).

For F. L. Jahn, the German language has to be in accordance with „Germanenes“ "masculine" and "distant to finery" (1816: 38-39). Similar conceptualization of a "self-image" through "language" is to be found in Dahn's *Bismarck und die deutsche Sprache*. To "speak German" here means to not incline to a "flowery language" (like within-the-poem glorified

Bismarck), but to act “strongly”. Synthetizing the conceptualized “self-image” of a “strong German” with the “attributes” of language, the German is conceptualized as a language of “cutting” and “stoking” (“Weil sie ‘gehau'n war und gestochen” [2016: 112]). Für unsre Sprache displays Dahn’s neoromantic linguistic nationalism most explicitly – the “German language” here “carries” the “German soul”: “Und Volkes Stimme, – das ist Volkes Sprache./ Sie kündet wahrer, unverfälschlicher/ Als Aug' und Haar und Antlitz und Gestalt/ Des Volkes Seele” (68).

To this nationalist synthetism of language, national-belonging, and identity, Ringelnatz responds with a comical, “nationalist language” deprecating paradox. Analogously to Ringelnatz’s “dedicated patriot” consciously inclining to language as to an identity-constituting medium, his utterance (in Turner-Marsch) involves national-identity confirming nouns and adjectives (nation, german, Germanic) which overabundantly frequent Dahn’s poetry: “Reißt die germanische Lodenjoppe auf!”; “Trinkt auf das Wohl der deutschen Frauen ein Glas,/ Dass es das ganze Vaterland durchschaume” (Ringelnatz 2015: 98). Alluding to the Dahn’s positive image of a German nationalist as being “combative” yet simultaneously “peaceful” (as Dahn writes: “Zur Friedensarbeit ziehn wir aus, /Zu bauen, nicht zu fechten,/ Doch blitzend schützt uns Schiff und Haus/ Das Schwert in unsrer Rechten!” [2016: 67]), Ringelnatz’s “germanenes” advocating athlete declares an intention to train in a “peaceful tournament”: “Wir wollen uns im friedlichen Wettkampf üben” (2015: 98). However, in stark contrast to his declared intention, his nationalist, ideological language traverses the “peaceful” orientation of his utterance by activating negative connotations of an antisemitic violence. In the very next verse, the patriot shouts “Hepp-hepp” – an antisemitic battle cry that gave name to the series of pogroms in 1819 (Hep-Hep-Unruhen) and has been ever since an established slogan of German antisemitism: “Braust drei Hepp-hepps und drei Hurras/ Um die deutschen Eichenbäume!” (2015: 98). The comical semantic discrepancy between the “peaceful” intention and the “hawkish” outspoken meaning unveils the nationalist manipulation of language in a negative light, as in contrast to the declared “peacefulness”, the dedicated patriots’ occupation of a “German oak tree” attains tragic undertones, discrediting his nationalist use of language with an ethically disgracing historic context.

Ringelnatz subverts nationalist usage of language by recontextualizing Dahn’s nation-mobilizing and marching-encouraging exclamations from the military into a non-military, sport-related contexts. Applying the motive of “trumpets”, Ringelnatz alludes Dahn’s appeals which read as follows: “Zum Reiterangriff ladender Trompeten/ Ertönt der Ruf: 'Freiwillige, hervor!'" (2016: 84); “Das ist der Klang der preußischen Trompete!/ Er ruft zum

Schutz des Vaterlands” (106). Reminiscing Dahn, Ringelnatz also positions the “trumpet” as a symbol of a unitary collective proceeding: “Schlagt die Pauken und Trompeten, Turner in die Bahn!” (2015: 98). However, here, within the absence of an auxiliary military context, the nationalist language becomes displayed as “the thing itself” – its “mobilizing” and “motivating” rhetorical devices become exposed in their overtly instructive nature.

Dahn’s poetry is overflowed with suggestive, didactic and highly imperative utterances, with instructions for the “Germans”, as well as with the illustrations of their “correct” following. In *Die Deutschen im Auslande*, the imperative is “Ihr sollt die Sprache nie verlernen” (2016: 66), while the inscenation of the imperatives’ correct following goes as follows: “Ihr deutschen Männer rufet: 'Nein!'/ Ihr deutschen Frauen, stimmt ein” (66). In other poem, Dahn instructs the “good of a nation” as a “solution” to be followed (“Sein Volk des Mannes höchstes Gut!«/ Ist unsre stolze Losung!”), while not being “dutiful” is instructively suggested to bear negative consequences: “Und wer vergäße solcher Pflicht,/ Der sei verfemt im Lande” (64). Another examples of Dahn's imperatives are: “Dröhnend und drohend über das Reich/ Schalle der eherne, warnende Streich“ and “Senket von Sedan die Siegesfähnen,/ Senket die Häupter in Scham, Germanen!” (62).

In Dahn’s artistic world, the imperatives occur in accordance with his nationalist worldview, as an expected, “automatized” and “natural” part of the nationalist utterances. Therefore, their status of a manipulative rhetorical device tends to remain unnoticed. In opposition, Ringelnatz brings the imperative rhetorical character of Dahn’s nationalist language on the visible “surface” and makes it a centre of readers attention, “defamiliarizes” the nationalist imperatives by a hyperbolic intensification of their presence as well as by their extending recontextualization from the purely abstract and “nation-related” contexts, into an atypical contexts that also deal with the physical exercise, displaying the imperative nature of Dahn’s rhetoric as preposterous: “Das ist ein Symbol für das Leben./ Immer aufwärts, himmelanstreben!/
Feste zieh! Nicht nachgeben!” (2015: 98); “Nicht einschlafen. Nicht müde werden!/
Du musst in Gedanken wähen: Du hörtest unter dir einen Schlund gähnen”; “Klimme, klimb/ Zum Olymp! / Höher hinauf!/
Glückauf!” (99). The didactic undertones of a stereotypical nationalist utterance are ridiculed also by Ringelnatz’s parodic moralism – if one is „aroused“ by a taken female, “Dann ist es ratsam, daß man sich versteckt” (99).

Dahn’s Aufruf der Königin Augusta is an appeal on the “German women” to be faithful to the “nation”: “(...) Das Vaterland erwartet,/ Daß alle Frau'n bereit sind, ihre Pflicht/ Zu tun!” (2016: 83). In response to such nationalist appellation, Ringelnatz also imposes an imperative on the “German

woman“, though in an even more explicit and therewith parodic manner. Ringelnatz replaces the nationalist “Land” with a phonetically reminiscent “Geländer“ (railings)”, but just like Dahn’s “Vaterland”, Ringelnatz’s “railings” also require subjects’ dedication: “Deutsche Frau, dich ruft der Barn,/ Denn dies trauliche Geländer/ Fördert nicht nur Hirn und Harn,/ Sondern auch die Muskelbänder” (2015: 101). Relating simultaneously to the contexts of “national belonging” and to “exercising”, with latter being a parodic recontextualization, the “German woman” becomes explicitly cluttered with imperatives: “Deutsches Weib, komm: Kippe, Kippe!”; “Deutsche Jungfrau, weg das Armband!/ In die Hose! Aus dem Rocke!; Rolle vorwärts! Rolle!/ Rolle rückwärts, deutsches Weib”; “Deutsches Mädchen- Grätsche! Grätsche!” (101). The imperative character of nationalist utterances becomes emphasized and defamiliarized by the comic extension of its reach – Ringelnatz’s “German woman” is not explicitly instructed to be “faithful” to her “duty” to “Vaterland”, as in Dahn’s case, but to “roll”, “squat” and “straddle”.

Conclusion

Involving a hyperbolic ridicule and parodic recontextualization of the nationalist rhetoric, as well as a dismissive dialogic response to the influential nationalist authors, Ringelnatz’s Turngedichte contain a subtle political statement – an expression of disdain to attempts to constitute the national identity through the medium of language and to subordinate language to nationalist means. Ringelnatz’s use of language not only “entertains”, but also protects the language from ideological stratifying.

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